



Tom Tiede *FPost*
7-8-74

Sky's The Limit For Presidential Gifts

By Tom Tiede

WASHINGTON — (NEA) — If there is any single factor which threads together the sins of the White House felons, it is that none obeyed the constitutional mandate of public accountability.

Secrecy and arrogance dictated the actions of the Colsons and Magruders. But though the lesson is painfully clear to the rest of the nation, some sequestered in the Richard Nixon bunker still have not gotten the thought.

One of the latest example of Executive Office evasion occurred when a reporter inquired about presidential gifts to foreign dignitaries. The occasion, of course, resulted from the mild criticism which accompanied the almost offhand presentation of a \$2 million military helicopter (and, temporarily, its crew) to Egypt's Anwar Sadat.

Sen. Robert Byrd, (D-W.Va.), for one, wondered before his colleagues about the propriety of the generosity: "The question that comes immediately to me is the obvious one. Was this helicopter . . . his to give away to the head of a foreign government? By what authority (did Nixon) act?"

The reporter asked nothing more than an answer to the senator's questions. What he received was the cold shoulder at first and, at second, ridiculous gobbledygook. After referring the reporter to the State Department, which referred the reporter to the White House, which again (six times) referred the reporter to the State Department, one White House staffer, Bruce Whelihan, said with heavy concern:

"We don't like to talk about the gifts the President gives. We don't like one recipient to know what the other has received. That's natural. You know, it's like having two girl friends, you just never tell the first what you are going to give the second."

As it happened, the newsman eventually got the information from head-shaking State Department officials. Though they, too, did "not think the subject was a public one," and in fact were "told not to answer questions about it," they

yielded in the end.

Stuart Rockwell, acting chief of protocol, said funds for most presidential gifts come from a limited cache in the protocol division. "We usually give small gifts, symbolic of American craftsmanship." He added that in some cases the gifts (such as the silver Chevrolet just given Leonid Brezhnev) "were donated by manufacturers for the purpose."

Rockwell could not answer questions on the specific helicopter. "That was out of our hands." Other protocol people said that the President "obviously just decided to give what he wanted to give." But apparently, say legal authorities, he has the full right.

Chapter 22, section 2395 of the U.S. Code allows the president to "make any loans, advances, and grants to any . . . friendly government or government agency . . . in furtherance of (healthy foreign relations)." In this case a "grant" could be a helicopter; President Roosevelt used to give destroyers during World War II.

So it seems the Sadat gift was legally correct, even though the Byrd concern with the moral implications of "lavish" giving may still be fair game for debate. And it is true, too, as Nixonians intimate, a \$2 million gift may not be the stuff of impeachment in a nation that pays \$30 billion annually for interest on its public debt.

Yet the experience of the inquiring reporter is a depressing example of the unbecoming, unnecessary, unlawful suppression of even harmless information in the White House. Small wonder that reporters, as anyone else seeking truth in the administration, are reduced to eavesdropping and leak-catching for public intelligence.

As Democrat Lawrence O'Brien says it: "Is this any way to run a country?"

It's not. It's the politics of gossamer web — what you see is next to nothing. Richard Nixon may or may not be guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors, but he rightfully can be faulted for ignorance of the Constitution — especially that part which covers public accountability. He may have read it, as Harry Truman is alleged to have said, "but if he did, he didn't understand it."